

Pragmatic Pathfinding. Reflective walk and talks with colleagues in children's services

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with Mark Hendy, Shannon Keogh and Huw Taylor

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Abstract

Pragmatic Pathfinding describes an application of Transmaterial Worlding (Simon and Salter, 2019) as a reflective walk and talk practice with peers in children's services. Charlie Chapman talks with colleagues Mark Hendy, Shannon Keogh and Huw Taylor about their experiences of working with families and about their personal connections with other than human members of the environment that they work in.

The ethics within Transmaterial Worlding are connected to sense making and actions to make a difference as part of interwoven social and ecological justice agendas. Walking and talking together provides a space to engage with wider contextual issues, engage with others and find forward steps together.

Citation Link

I work and live in an area of South Wales that is home to ex-mining communities; people living in terraced houses mainly along the bottom of steep-sided valleys, the rivers running with shredded plastic bags towards the estuary at Cardiff Bay.

On top of the disused coal tips near my house, ecologists have found rare insect life never recorded elsewhere in the UK (Buglife, 2026). Young men on scrambler motorbikes use the tips for jumps. Inside the tips, I am told, were buried tin barrels of 'don't ask'. The water from these tips flows into a stream that runs near my house, and in which children play in the summer. The disused tall brick chimney has a protection order in place to protect the bats now roosting inside. I walk to discover new pathways, to connect with non-human others, to be closer to the earth and the seasons, and to breathe the air.

"We are water. We are air. We grow, we bloom, we seed, we wilt, we die. There is a false separation between humanity and nature"

(Nora Bateson, 2016).

I wake up with my heart racing; dreaming, reliving a distressing time in work where I tried to be there for a family, but my being and doing wasn't enough to help soothe the emotion in any quicker time than it was taking.

In retrospect, I think, even at the time, I thought the distress was appropriate for the situation.

Another worker present commented to me, which I thought insinuated that I was responsible for this distress.

This was both incorrect and correct. If I inhabit the failure that I think they see me as, I am paralysed.

The anxious feeling had attached itself to this thought to wake me up.

Power runs through this. Power of the state, power of professionals, power of families, the power of embodied feelings that we channel, dodge and share. I am an agent of the state. I am part of the traumatising system. I want to support liberation from oppression. I need to talk with my colleagues. I need to hear the families better. I need to be in a wider world.

Anxiety is... a major force in the system because of the complexity and emotional intensity of work with families where children could be or are being harmed... Waves of anxiety travel through the system

(Munro, 2011, p. 134).

Waves travel through me, through other workers, through families. We lived through waves of anxiety in the COVID crisis. We have children caught in waves of anxiety, unable to attend school. There is a real [realist] threat of existential and ego annihilation. In a child protection context violence in the family could end a life and a child being removed into care affects family members and communities' senses of identity and belonging deeply. These families' lives' matter and all lives are connected. How am I changed by working here in the Valleys? What supports change and how do we 'do change' together so it is 'change-with' and not 'to'?

I wake up on another morning with a dream of being beside fast, flowing white water. The light is bright and beautiful. I want to explore further up a deep, mossy gorge, full of white mist. I take this as a sign of knowing what my soul needs. I use my lunchtime to walk next to a deep water river. I let the water run through me (though I walk on the bank). The water does water, I am water, we rush through life together.

Unlike Peter Reason, it's not a river I have sparked up a relationship with, like Peter Reason, and I didn't attempt a pan-psychic conversation:

The world feels different to Peter the moment he steps out of the car and begins to walk down to the River... [He] introduces himself to River with his given, Medicine and Sacred names and asks to be in communion.... takes out a gift he has brought a jar of rain-water.... He intends to offer it in River's honour, asking for any teachings to be shared

(Kurio and Reason, 2021, p. 6).

I am a floating thinker and exploratory learner on a journey in terms of ascribing to philosophies of knowledge. I want to stay open to innovative post-qualitative methods and ideas of trans-material enquiry, as I connect with the value-based desire to enact a practice that encourages a one-ness rather than the colonisation of nature. I talked to Leah, one of the creators of the concept of Transmaterial

Worlding (Salter and Simon, 2019), and she described the practice as a ‘systemic living and breathing’, (Salter, personal communication, 6th February 2026) ‘and living life as enquiry’ (Marshall, 1999). These are attitudes that really speak to me, as I hold a wish to be a ‘systemic activist’ (Palmer, 2021). I am a practical person engaged with people for whom these very sentences might be as impenetrable as a brambly hedge and/or who may see other highest context markers in terms of what needs to be done in the world, what dialogues are held with who and how we might achieve and communicate those things.

I message several colleagues and offer walk and talk sessions.

For me, walking and talking, is a simple dialogical and experiential practice and an action I can take to bring myself into my body in this place. I have a layer of John Dewey’s version of pragmatism within me from my youthwork days; his idea that communication is “most wonderful’... [its] fruit... participation, sharing” (Dewey, 1929, p. 166) is central to societal and individual growth. The back and forth of dialogue, the rhythm of our feet on the land.

Transmaterial Worlding (Simon and Salter, 2019) is a bridge from a physical world, where social worlds talk in realist terms and a prompt to attend to relationships of many kinds through the lens of social construction, and see the world as made up of transmaterial systems and co-inhabitants (ibid, 2019). It reminds me to consider context that we’re not talking about or focusing on. Communities facing broken promises investment for jobs and where the most money and status is to be made in dealing cocaine. Racism and dog-whistle politics, the power of the state, the faint sound of global war on the wind. The long history of standing against oppression in the valleys. The local charity started by a parent to support families where there is neurodiversity. The efforts of social work leaders to make collaborative practice the essence of the work, rather than proceduralism. The windmills on the valley sides. What we put in our stomachs, what we nurture in our homes and in fields.

A retired family therapist colleague of mine, Mark Hendy, helped me think about the sort of conversations I was having with families and other workers. Being mindful and respectful of the context and ‘finding the lowest hanging fruit’: An action to take that the family identifies as positive and useful. I have walked and talked with Mark previously, at Parc Slip Nature Reserve, Bridgend. He is now retired but kindly asked after my writing. We spoke online after I’d shared an early draft of this piece.

Mark said that what appealed to him was the aspect of these ideas within this article not involving language. Recognising ‘experience’ that is afterwards articulated. But acknowledging that the meaning of the word doesn’t reflect the experience. This seems to reflect what Leah described as Transmaterial Worlding, as ‘moving through the world, creating worlds as we move. How this has come to be understood is through language and human interaction. But it is more than this’ (Salter, 2026, personal communication, February 6th, 2026).

Mark told me about a dad he had been working with over 20 years ago. They were walking alongside a river by the car park at the back of a block of flats.

Mark:

He said, this water is getting clean and the fish are coming back. I didn’t know anything about mining and the area. He said it used to be black and slimy and bubbly on top. It’s changed over the years. He knew that, from experience, he hadn’t researched it in a book. And where I was

at that time was at a feeling of being stuck and things not changing. I'd had a conversation with another worker who'd gone away to study. She'd said that the problem here is that everything is stuck and no-one wants to change. But those two things side by side had an effect on me. That dad had a very different sense of things changing. I didn't know anything about where I was working. But I don't necessarily think I had to.

We talked about how different spaces mean different things to different people. I said that sometimes when I pass through a field of sheep on a sunny day, I feel disheartened by the lack of plant diversity and the knowledge that these lambs are here only for their later slaughter. Mark was reminded of a book; 'The Rings of Saturn' (Sebald, 1995). He described it as a book of local pilgrimage.

Mark:

This place, this patch of ground, has meaning baked in by geography and history. Something that is anchoring and gives a sense of who we are in the universe. And yet in the book, everything revolves around destruction. We are doing it at personal and international levels. It is part of what it means to be human. Can we experience that without becoming depressed? Because there's life too.

Mark's sense-making, and a call by Gail Simon at her workshop 'Permissions to Play' (November 14th, 2024) to name our approaches help me bring together some of these diverse ideas as 'pragmatic pathfinding'.

Pathfinding, is one way we can navigate complex relational situations; in work and in the world. The walk has purpose, direction and aim. It fits with what Gwyn Daniel describes as "the core of systemic practice.... a constant movement between pragmatic engagement and epistemological reflection... [with a] greater emphasis on the contexts which... transactions take place and the feedback processes they create" (2005, p. 60).

In our work, we try to find a way out of the deep mud of the place we find ourselves. Often, many factors have converged on the place we find ourselves, and many not of a family's choice or control. Eco-systemic thinking notices other things happening in this dynamic environment, as well as the relationship between mud and boot. And through conversation that looks backwards, forward and pauses in the present moment, including and listening to others (human and non-human); we find paths forward together.

John Shotter's writing on 'seeing and hearing the voice of nature' (2006) feels synergetic with the thinking in Salter and Simons, *Transmaterial Worlding* (2019)

I have explored ... participatory way of thinking– as distinct from the disengaged or detached forms of thought and discourse we currently employ in the academic and intellectual spheres of our lives – which gives us a chance of the 'face' and the 'voice' of our natural surroundings becoming present to us. But I say only a chance, as such a full responsiveness is not easy to achieve. Only if we are prepared to return, like little children, to our primordial commerce with the world, to a pre-Cartesian way of being in the world in which we approach it not as self-conscious, self-contained, individual thinkers and deliberate actors, but as living responsive, participant parts of a larger whole'

(Shotter, 2006, pp. 10-11)

Transmaterial Worlding (Simon and Salter, 2019), adds a layer of moral purpose with social and environmental justice to Shotter's (2006) description, and to my own pathfinding lens. Transmaterial Worlding (ibid) encourages us to make good use of systemic ideas. In Transmaterial Worlding (ibid) I see narrative ideas, positive connotations, strengths focus, curiosity towards resources in the system (who else, mutual support), reflexivity, attending to context, social and political factors, bringing difference and perturbation. All of these ways of being in order to influence positive change in the world. Transmaterial Worlding (ibid) expresses a reminder to add a wider view; a shift in thinking or perspective, or an action that can be taken to be useful on the micro level whilst also engaging with macro or vice versa.

Pathfinding with colleagues

While the pathfinding organises my thoughts, I plan a route in work to offer reflective spaces with colleagues as an opportunity to be useful to each other as well as convene with wider eco-systems. Being able to take the work outside is a place where our stories, "can be honoured, not quashed or sanitised within a clinic setting. This is not just about individual wellbeing, as important as that is. This is political, purposefully disruptive, actively dissident. Practising outdoors is about practicing outside of the parameters that constrain- not to practice outside of ethical boundaries but to reset them within a frame of relational ethics/responsibility (Larner, 2015; McNamee and Gergen, 2009; Shaw, 2011) where nature is within the relational frame (Santin, 2021).

Being outside evokes a different conversation; full of resonances and connections with people and non-human parts of nature past and present; that are wholly entwined with our sense of self, direction and purpose in our journeys.

Shannon, Llantrisant Common

Shannon and I walked on a slightly wet and windy day on Llantrisant common. We are colleagues in the same department based out of what has been, in various incarnations, a coal manager's house, a hospital, a youth hostel and a family centre. I was wondering as we were walking whether the windswept, bleak orange and yellow midwinter common, framed by some small greener hills; connected in some way.

Shannon:

Growing up, I lived in various places in the North of England, between Yorkshire and Lancashire. Yorkshire is very green in my memory, a memory of living in a small town on the skirts of Bradford. The town I lived in was a deprived area, racially diverse yet divided, made up of pockets of 'troubled areas' with some 'safer' streets in-between, here and there. When I reflect on my experience of those landscapes, it feels divided into two worlds, as it felt to me then. In one world, I would hang around in vandalised playgrounds. 'Green areas' on the council estate, which were not that green as they were just a free for all for all the bored kids, making dens, and I hate to say, starting fires.

Charlie:

In my imagining, you've added the 'hate to say' for readers (for me?) who might make a judgment about starting fires. It makes me think these fires weren't to keep warm, but maybe to see the effect of fire tearing through places some might say they shouldn't be. The human urge Mark talked of to both create and destroy.

Shannon:

It could be pretty territorial among different groups or 'gangs'; the instinct at a young age to make your mark on a place and call it your own, and people be damned if they cross your borders. Feels amusing in a disconcerting sort of way.

In the other world, my nana would take me to places like Hebden Bridge, Howarth Moors and Shippley Glen. We would play follow the leader as my 7-year-old self would guide her to safety across 'treacherous' land – we still laugh at how I really believed I was saving her life. My nana instilled in me the importance of looking after the land we are blessed with; Small Shannon didn't say boo to a goose but found some courage in the echo of Nana's voice in her conscience when she saw people litter. There was a real peace I found in these environments that just wasn't present in my more immediate community, which was unpredictable and chaotic. Even as a child, I felt the value of that.

This relationship to the landscape, the feeling of familiarity and comfort, has been my one consistent, flowing through the different chapters of my life and connecting the versions of myself.

We paused at our walk at an open space, and I asked what difference it makes, if any to meet outside.

Charlie:

I recall you said that there's a benefit that goes beyond. For example, communication skills, when you're climbing with a young person. You said 'it's the whole experience of it'. The way you said it was like there is something profound about being in an outdoor environment that cannot be expressed in words.

Shannon:

When I said, there's a value in being outdoors with young people that I don't think can be measured by short term metrics, or objectively at all. It is that value which feels immeasurable and invaluable: there is a resilience in having grounded yourself to the land with which you are always connected, when there can be so much change and turmoil in our lives. This feels particularly potent in relation to the people we support, especially the young people whose circumstances are often out of their control.

I am privileged to have had the space, the time, and a person to foster my relationship to the natural world, in which my existence is inherent and inseparable. Nothing could have predicted the impact this would have on the person I've become, the way I choose to live my life as an adult. If I can be that person, provide that space and time for the young people I support, who would likely not have that otherwise, I'm satisfied with the impact that our encounter will have on their path.

I didn't say this at the time, but I grew up on the edge of a common about 50 miles west of where we were walking together. A colleague of ours, Lisa Evans, said seeing horses living in a herd [rather than in a bounded field] gives great joy. That put something into words that I hadn't articulated, but understood. She also gave me a stern word against feeding them apples, rightly so, as I didn't realise horses can choke or get colic from this. Animals, roaming all over the road, were a sign I was nearly home.

Shannon and I shared funny 'near-death' stories of leaping over barbed wire fences to avoid being trampled in fields by cows and horses. We both had a sense that the animals we had met previously may have been spooked and that we possibly would have been trampled if we had stuck around. The anxiety was wholly appropriate in the circumstances. A sensible reverence for the size of the animals, trapped in a field and from whom we sensed fear and flight. Their fear and flight/ours; it didn't really matter.

I wonder if you experienced the horses 'looking at you' at the end of the walk differently from your previous encounter as they stood at the base of some trees, watching us as we walked up the tarmac single-track road.

Shannon:

It's funny you say, "their fear and flight/ours; it doesn't really matter". The story that I recalled of me being spooked by a tame horse who did no more than look at me – it was definitely my fear. Presumably, a herd of semi-wild horses with no boundary between us should have provoked at least the same level of fear. Yet I felt pretty calm in the face of that herd. I could attribute that to a number of reasons as to why that might be, but for certain something about the conditions of this encounter changed my relationship to the animal, and I think as a result to myself, in comparison to the version of myself in the previous story.

I asked about where we might meet next and suggested woods - a place you felt a sense of connection with.

Shannon:

Yes, I used to walk for what felt like ages with my Nana and her dog, Ellie, in the woods. And with my friend's family and their dog, Sasha. I always remember thinking that I wanted to be like them when I was older – my friend's parents – and when I'm out with my dog, or on my bike, I have a feeling of having 'made it'.

Charlie:

Our Nan[a]s, the dogs, friends, the woods, these cherished ones that help us connect and move towards a present of calmness and a future lived fully. I am reminded of Breden and Palmer (2026, p. 5) "our attention is inherited and that the positions we take in our work and our writing are carried forward from many sources.... values that shaped us long before we knew their significance, and, ultimately, an encounter with love for all life and all living creatures".

Huw, Cwm Coke Coal Processing Plant

Huw was retiring from Children's Services after 24 years. We had worked together, in the same department, as with Shannon. Before this, Huw had worked at a coal-processing works. We walked along a disused railway line towards the works. Walking old railway lines is part of Huw's retirement plan.

Huw:

I would walk down this railway line on a Saturday afternoon, in my orange overalls and pit boots.

Charlie:

Were you pretending to do some official business?

Huw:

[laughs]. I've still got my work's helmet, and a brand-new donkey jacket. It's a woollen coat, better than anything you can get today. It's so comfortable. They're about £150-300 pounds. It says Cwm Coke on it. I started there as a junior process worker, 16 years old, straight out of school. I worked at the Coke Works for 24 years. On your 18th birthday, you'd start shift work – it was running 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It was not easy, it was stinking, dirty, smelly...

Charlie:

Would you have been able to hear it from where we are now?

Huw:

Oh yes, you'd be able to hear the noise of the big cobbles going into the wagons. It was really noisy. I loved it, it was like one big playground

Charlie [interior]:

My view of Cwm Coke, strongly shaped by Alexander Cordell's book 'Rape of the Fair Country', set in 1826 in the South-East valleys, took a startled jump. In my mind, the Cordell characters, perennially on strike, praying, going back to stoke hells-fires, turned over Huw's decent coat with suspicion in their iron-ore burnt hands. And my middle-class prejudices – both romanticising and demonising the coal industry – started to look a bit sheepish.

Huw:

They laid on buses to get us in. Then the economy opened up, and people bought cars, and then the buses went. There were about 350 people who worked there, and they would say '50 of them couldn't read or write'. It was a low skill job, but high pay – about £50 a week – you don't get anything like that any more.

Charlie [interior]:

I have very much taken my employment status for granted. There's been very little time in my adult life I've been out of work. I am privileged to have the ability, support, education and

opportunity to have had a consistent wage.

We'd arrived at the entrance to the site. A partially overgrown sign welcomed us.

Charlie:

Can you tell me why the sign has got paint thrown over it?

Huw:

Well, the pollution was horrific. Sometimes the wind used to whip up the coal dust, and you'd see a whirlwind of black coming down along the stream. People wanted it closed. There were a lot of arguments. One was that there weren't enough locals working there, and then they employed some local people to try and sort it out.

We followed a path alongside a high, diagonally-crossed-wire fence topped with barbed wire. Through it, I could see thin trees, huge brick and concrete buildings with every window smashed through. Rusting pipes and marsh grass.

Huw:

This used to be where the gas compressors were. It was a mesmerising noise. 'chuga-chuga-chuga', all day and night. I had a little cabin near here. I brought a young person here [when working in children's services] and showed him the cabin I used to work from. I wanted to take a group to the steelworks in Port Talbot, but it never happened. I'm most proud of the young person I helped go all the way to university, though.

Charlie [interior]:

What has been gained in bird song replacing industrial noise and cleaner air and water is offset by the loss of job opportunities for young men, in particular. My thoughts of ecological and social justice all start jostling for position.

Huw:

You knew your place. The foreman told you to do something, and you did it. If you had a disagreement with someone, you'd sort it out over the car park. It was hard work. But I loved it. You'd go to the pubs. Young people aren't drinking in the pubs now, and people wonder why they're closing.

We walked up to a field and onto a tarmacked lane lined with trees.

Huw:

There was a guy who worked here, used to come up here on break. He knew where all the nests were. Owls, thrushes, robins, tits and the odd buzzard. He showed me where they were.

Walking together was a chance for me to try to gain some wisdom from Huw's experiences. We came to a wood that Huw hadn't been to before.

Huw:

I think one thing we've missed a trick with, in children services, is, people who we worked with

20 years ago; we should have kept tabs on them and asked them what worked and what didn't work. Get their feedback to see what made a difference.

This feels like wisdom to me; no longer in it, Huw could see the woods from the trees. Did the trees say something to Huw? I make a mental note to see if I put this into action in a different research project.

A place to pause

As we talk, my mind's eye takes me far away from where our feet land. Imagined scenes of people's past conversations and actions in other places. My feet automatically and intuitively carry me along. And then suddenly the punctuation of different sights, sounds and smells of now. Like a frame being changed around us. Did you hear that pwweeeee? We both did. What do you think it can see from up there? What do you think it would make of what we're talking about from its point of view?

Tom Bullough, in his modern pilgrimage, "*Sarn Helen*", quotes Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux:

"You will find something more in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you can never learn from masters" (2023, p. 179).

To understand family breakdown, to support families where there may be worries about abuse or neglect, to make positive differences in communities divided by social and ecological injustice; we must have the courage to nurture the urge to explore. Look for paths whose destinations are unknown to us, make mental notes to come back and find them. Tread with respect since Transmaterial Worlding (Salter and Simons, 2019) supports us to understand that separation from other parts of nature is an illusion. We make mistakes, take wrong turns, need to look at things using a different map, and look for new vistas. Listen and respond to the cues of the interlinked ecologies around us.

Being alongside one another, we see the sea of mud in front of us. Lack of opportunities, lack of hope, inequality, loss of care for our communities of all kinds. Taking good humour along with all the relevant precautions, we create stories that help us travel. Having a sense of comradeship keeping us going, and at least one person giving us a sense of hope that we can do it.

On that note, I am grateful to Gail, Leah, Julia and my supervisors Jo, Jeff and Kieran, who have encouraged me on this journey so far.

Choose your issue and choose your space

TIME TO BE MOVING ON.

Choose your level and choose your pace

TIME TO BE MOVING ON.

Peggy Seeger (2006)

Note

All authors and named people I have quoted with personal communications have reviewed this work and agreed to their inclusion.

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About the author

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